

Aseptic Meningitis (also called Viral Meningitis)

What is aseptic meningitis?

"Meningitis" means inflammation of the membranes covering the brain and spinal cord. Aseptic meningitis is usually caused by viruses (e.g., enterovirus). The illness is generally less serious than meningitis caused by bacteria or fungi. Aseptic meningitis is rarely fatal, and most people recover completely.

Who gets aseptic meningitis?

Almost anyone can develop aseptic meningitis, however the disease is most often seen in young children.

How is the virus spread?

The spread of the virus depends upon the type of virus involved. The most common viruses that cause aseptic meningitis are spread in the stool of an infected person. The virus can pass from one person to another through contact with the infected person (e.g., shaking hands) or touching something that the infected person has handled. The viruses then enter the body through the eyes, mouth, or nose. Some viruses that can cause aseptic meningitis can be spread by inhaling or touching droplets created when the infected person coughs or sneezes.

How long can a person spread the disease?

The viruses that cause aseptic meningitis can usually be spread beginning about 3 days after the person is infected. The viruses can continue to be spread for weeks after symptoms have developed.

What are the symptoms of aseptic meningitis?

Symptoms of meningitis include a sudden onset of fever with headache, stiff neck, muscle aches, loss of appetite, nausea, vomiting, and a general feeling of not being well. More severe symptoms include confusion, eye sensitivity to bright light, and seizures.

In babies, meningitis can be hard to identify. Babies with meningitis may have a fever, cry a lot, be hard to wake up, and refuse to eat. Depending on the virus, a rash may appear.

How soon after exposure do symptoms appear?

Symptoms generally appear 3 to 6 days after exposure.

What is the treatment for aseptic meningitis?

For aseptic meningitis, the doctor will try to relieve the symptoms but there is no specific treatment. Because aseptic meningitis is caused by a virus, antibiotics are useless in treating it, and will not make the patient feel better. The doctor may perform tests to make sure that the patient doesn't have a more serious illness, such as bacterial meningitis. Most people recover within about 7-10 days.

How can aseptic meningitis be prevented?

You can prevent the spread of the viruses that cause aseptic meningitis by:

- Washing your hands carefully and thoroughly with soap and water after using the bathroom or changing diapers;
- Covering your mouth and nose when coughing and sneezing, and using disposable tissues to wipe your nose;
- Not sharing food and drinks with others, even if they do not appear to be sick; and,
- Washing objects and surfaces with a dilute bleach solution (made by mixing ¼ cup of chlorine-containing household bleach with 1 gallon water) to destroy the viruses that can cause aseptic meningitis. There are no specific vaccines to prevent aseptic meningitis.

